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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SOUTH BAGHDAD: ON THE EVE OF U.S. MILITARY
REDUCTION, THE FORMER "TRIANGLE OF DEATH" AT A CROSSROADS

REF: BAGHDAD 285

Classified By: Classified by ePRT Baghdad South Team Leader Juan Alsace
, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is an ePRT Baghdad South report.

SUMMARY

1. (U) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: The January 25 Transfer of Authority (TOA) from ePRT Baghdad South's current partner brigade (30th HBCT) to the incoming new brigade (1/3 ID) is a good moment for a snapshot of the Area of Operations (AO) jointly shared with the 30th for the past 10 months. In an AO which includes the heavily urban areas of southern Baghdad and the largely rural spaces of the cross-sectarian Mahmudiyah Qada (district), stabilization efforts in 2009 faced a diverse cast of characters, each with its own sense of priorities. In consultation with these Iraqi power brokers, to include sheihks, local government officials, Iraqi ministries, and NGOs, the ePRT and the 30th HBCT mapped out a path the team believed would enhance security and stability and encourage Iraqi buy-in to the democratic process.

2.(C) This corner of the former "Triangle of Death," if not exactly quiescent, saw a significant drop in violence and enjoyed resurgence in economic activity. The team has been told sectarian conflict is a thing of the past. The ePRT believes Iraqis in this AO will go the polls March 7, uneasily but in significant number, motivated by a sense they are at a point of definition between progress and reversion. However, the gains are fragile, and violence continues, with diminished scope and non-sectarian origins. Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and other rejectionist elements remain viable here and are prepared to exploit divisions, such as those created by the recent decision to ban alleged Ba'athist candidates. In partnership with Iraqis, the ePRT and its military partners had some success in rebuilding a defunct water delivery system (potable and for irrigation), revitalizing a moribund agricultural economy, and empowering civil society. Remaining challenges include strengthening the effectiveness of local governing councils and integrating their work with higher levels of governance. Essential services remain a sore spot with the populace. Local efforts to create jobs, especially for the Sons of Iraq (SOI) who make up a large pool of unemployed in this AO, have been disappointing. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

BREATHING SPACE

3.(SBU) Some 10 months ago the new Team Leader of ePRT Baghdad South, and the Commanding Officer of its partner brigade, the 30th HBCT, arrived in an area which only months before had carried the moniker "Triangle of Death" as an epicenter of vicious pre-surge sectarian fighting. While

violence was trending down in April 2009, the team sought to encourage the continued development of) or sometimes create) conditions which would reinforce hard won security gains. In a series of May-June 2009 meetings with area power brokers, to include local and national-level governance officials, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) commanders, and key sheikhs, the team determined that, pursuant to identified Iraqi priorities, U.S. efforts should be principally directed at: rebuilding a defunct water delivery system (potable and for irrigation); revitalizing a moribund agricultural economy; creating jobs for unemployed Sons of Iraq (SOI) (through some infrastructure development, principally roads); and, empowering civil society by identifying and enabling credible NGOs in the areas of education, health care, and women's rights.

REDUCTION IN VIOLENCE
QREDUCTION IN VIOLENCE

4.(C) In the seven months since, this area has seen a substantial reduction in violence attributable to the increased professionalism of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), working with the 30th HBCT, in identifying and disabling terrorist networks. Improvised explosive devices (IED), vehicle-born IED's (VBIED) and explosively formed projectile (EFP) attacks against U.S. Forces or ISF averaged 3.16 per week in July 2009, the first month after U.S. Forces pulled out of cities, villages, and localities per the Security Agreement. This number has dropped to 1.5 per week, according to PRT's partner brigade. Similarly, attacks targeting Iraqi civilians dropped to 2.5 per week from 4.97 in July 2009. Despite these reductions, maps of the "Rashids"

(the southern urban districts of Baghdad), are still well decorated with the dots marking weekly incidents. The overall improvement in the security environment has created more space for the return of economic activity and local development initiatives. What follows is a snapshot of why the ePRT believes cautious optimism exists to conclude that in this AO Iraqi residents will go to the polls on March 7.

THE PROMISE OF BETTER DAYS..

15. (U) ePRT South Baghdad's AO, which includes both the lightly populated rural spaces of Mahmudiyah (MMD) Qada as well as the heavily urbanized northern areas of the Rashids, has had an ongoing problem with water, both for drinking and for irrigation. In the rural areas, particularly, potable water remains an issue, with availability at the mercy of irregular delivery via water tankers. In the urban areas, the ePRT, employing a mix of both Commander's Emergency Response Program funds (CERP) and Quick Response Funds (QRF), partnered with the GOI to renovate key water pumping and water treatment facilities in the Qada. This has led to a marked improvement in the availability of potable water. These U.S.-funded projects were relatively low dollar in value, complementing larger GOI projects. Additional capacity building will take place by the targeted spending of CERP for the training of GOI personnel. Irrigation issues were addressed through several CERP-funded projects the 30th oversaw, in which hundreds of kilometers of irrigation canals were cleaned or repaired. Not only has this improved the availability of water to farmers, it has provided jobs to hundreds of unemployed Sons of Iraq (SOI) who might otherwise have looked elsewhere for sources of income.

6.(U) The January 10, 2010, ribbon-cutting ceremony opening a CERP-funded renovated poultry processing plant is a key milestone in a three-year Brigade/ePRT effort to revitalize what had been one of the Qada's principal economic activities, poultry production. Tying together breeder houses, fertile egg production, hatcheries, and grower houses and then the processing plant in an "economic value chain," overseen by an NGO, the effort will create jobs and economic growth in a rural area desperate for both. Other projects

include establishing a demonstration farm, under the auspices of an umbrella agricultural association, to bring modern farming techniques and new technologies to the Qada's farmers. Restoring the Latifiyah Agricultural Research Center, which once held pride of place as one of Iraq's principal agricultural learning centers until destroyed by terrorists, is another. With agriculture sure to remain Iraq's second highest GDP earner into the seeable future, as well as a significant employer, these efforts will continue.

FACTS SHOW IMPROVED QUALITY OF LIFE

7.(SBU) The overall quality of life in the AO trended upwards as security stabilized. The 30th's study of consumer pricing ("basket of goods") between January 2009 and December 2009 shows a marked decrease in price for key food staple items. For example, rice (down 750 percent from 1500 ID/kilo to 200 ID/kilo), flour (down 400 percent from 1000 ID/kilo to 250 ID/kilo) and cooking oil (down 416 percent from 2500 ID/liter to 600 ID/liter) all showed huge decreases. The price of fruits and vegetables also dropped significantly if not as dramatically, although meat prices went up modestly (chicken breasts up 29 percent, lamb and beef both up 27 percent). Qbreasts up 29 percent, lamb and beef both up 27 percent). Fuel prices (benzene, kerosene, LP) for both government set and black market were either stable or dropped over the course of the year. Clearly outside market forces played a role in these prices) for example, restrictions on importation of foreign produce) but some is attributable to confidence in the average Iraqi that it was safe again to go to market.

GROWING GOODWILL TOWARDS THE U.S.

8.(SBU) ePRT programs are bringing literacy to adults (a current program will provide basic third grade level reading and math skills to over 3600 individuals, 70 percent of them women) as well as developing employable skills at a community learning center that will provide preventative health education. (COMMENT: This combination of better security and visible U.S.-funded programs has clearly improved the image of the United States in this AO. The ePRT continually hears from both Shi'a as well as Sunni contacts) including those very critical of the U.S. military presence in the past) that they would like the team to stay on "because the ISF isn't ready yet" or "corruption within the GOI" precludes continued progress. The ePRT gently but firmly demurs, saying it has confidence in both the ISF and GOI and that,

consistent with President Obama's April 2009 statement in Baghdad, it is time to hand over the reins to Iraqis. END COMMENT.)

GROUNDED IN REALITY

9.(C) Even though life is more secure and economic prospects better, the Iraqi man or woman in this AO appears to have little faith in the government. Rashid District Council Chairman Yaqoub Yusif al-Bakhaty told ePRToffs that Iraqis are tired of politicians who look out only for their own personal or narrow partisan interests. As one Baghdad PC member, Yaseen Mustafa Lazam (Iraqiyya coalition) told the ePRT January 22, corruption and nepotism are pervasive throughout "all levels of government." The MMD Qada Municipality Director Arkan Abboud (Tawafuq) avers that all service contracts let by the Baghdad Governorate for trash collection are decided solely on kickback or political favor grounds and not competency. (COMMENT: The overpowering stench of garbage in MMD remains testament to that truth. END COMMENT.) The lure of bribes aside, local level officials lack skills, including basic literacy, and have proven difficult to train in even the most rudimentary governance tasks. And local level councils also lack

legitimacy. Creatures of the now defunct CPA, they will continue to be seen as such by the Provincial Council (PC) for which they depend on funds, until elected in their own right. (NOTE: Septel forthcoming. END NOTE.)

CONTINUED PROBLEMS WITH ESSENTIAL SERVICES

10.(SBU) Delivery of essential services continues to be plagued by stove-piped bureaucratic systems and virtually no substantial coordination between either levels of government or between affected ministries. What delivery of services does exist is centrally funded and often beholden to a system that emphasizes personal relationships over process. This highly centralized approach breeds corruption and misalignment of scarce resources with local needs. For example, proposed improvements to the MMD sewer lines were approved and funded by the previous Governor but put on hold, pending &project review,8 by the current Governor after the January provincial elections. MMD Municipality Director Fatima Hassan Mandal complained to the ePRT that a new site assessment contract was then awarded to an inept engineering firm working under the auspices of Baghdad University (state-run), leading to substantial cost overruns and delays.

"WHEN SADDAM WAS IN POWER, WE HAD POWER"

11.(U) The record for electricity is mixed. While delivery has generally increased, with many areas now receiving up to 12 hours of power per day, service is non-continuous with wide variations in availability. Some areas receive almost 24 hours of power and others as little as four. Customers receive little or no notice as to when the power will start or stop. Besides the damage wrought on equipment at substations, it also hinders essential services facilities (including hospital operating rooms) and manufacturing industries that require predictable periods of power to operate their machinery. The ePRT has heard from several owners of plants that they could expand hours of production and employ many more workers if they had power. The ePRT often hears commented, without an apparent sense of irony, that "when Saddam was in power, we had power."

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"BROKEN PROMISE" TO SONS OF IRAQ

12.(SBU) In the eyes of many of the team's contacts, especially in the rural, Sunni-dominated areas of the AO, the GOI's contractual failure to deliver on essential services is mirrored in its "broken promise," a phrase used by several of the ePRT's interlocutors, to re-integrate former SOI into society. This issue is a constant refrain in discussions: the GOI has either not provided SOI with jobs, provided jobs that are demeaning, has not paid out salaries, or has persecuted with illegal detentions those who "heroically" fought the AQI. Locally influential sheikhs such as Sheikh Fariq al Gherri and Sheikh Moiad al Hamdan, from whose ranks the SOI sprung, told eprt they are not satisfied by recent claims that some 50,000 SOI are now employed by the GOI or that salary payments are largely current. While they recognize implicitly that all SOI cannot find positions in the ISF or GOI ministries, and that the solution lies in stimulating economic activity that will create private market jobs, the issue for them is one of dignity and respect. Some

sheikhs continue to allude to "the consequences" of not finding meaningful employment for a cadre of 18-35 year old males, a thinly-veiled warning that cannot be taken as mere bluster, given the AO's history.

THE PAST NOT LIKELY PROLOGUE

13.(C) In rejoinder to the threat of renewed violence,

however, a substantial majority of Iraqis in this area do not want to see a return to the cycle of violence. Local officials and tribal leaders have told the eRPT that the relative quiet of the past 12-15 months indicates that sectarian conflict is a thing of the past. They observed that disputes, including those that are still settled by targeted killings, are "political" or "tribal" or simply "criminal" in nature, as opposed to sectarian crimes. They also invariably blame "outside influences" (read: Iran, if the speaker is a rural Sunni sheikh; Saudi Arabia or Syria if an urban Shia politician) for trying to stir the sectarian pot. The current uproar over the banning of politicians for alleged ties to Saddam and the former Ba'athist regime is a good example of this thinking (reftel). Prominent Sunni Sheikh Hassan Hamdani, a candidate for the CoR running on the cross-sectarian Iraqiyya coalition list, found himself on the list of those banned and then subsequently "delisted." He is one of many to tell the eRPT that this exercise, with the full support of Iran, is "pure politics" aimed at "intellectuals, academics, and technocrats" who pose a secular challenge to Maliki's conservative, Islamist-leaning government. It is not, he said emphatically, a "Sunni-Shia problem."

COMMENT

14.(C) AQI and other rejectionist elements in this AO will seek to widen the Sunni-Shia divide, exploiting perceived sectarian disputes when possible, to include the lingering SOI integration issue. Resentment of a central government that regularly fails to deliver essential services, especially to rural Sunni areas, will provide additional ammunition as insurgents in this area work to discourage participation in the electoral process.

15.(C) The betting here, however, is that the rejectionists will fail in their effort to turn back the clock. While residents struggle with rampant corruption, poor provision of services and a security situation that is much better but not yet stable, the eRPT's interlocutors are quite consistent in telling the team that uncertainty will not deter Iraqis in this area from going to the polls, with predictions that up to 70 percent of eligible voters intend to cast their ballots March 7. However, how they will vote is also not clear to the team. While Maliki may benefit from being a known, if imperfect product, a "throw the bums out" trend is also in evidence. The fact that they will vote is a hopeful sign that Iraq's democratic experiment continues to move in the right direction. END COMMENT.
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